

Things Beginners Encounter While Contra Dancing

Rob Conboy, Aug 2019

Everyone is different. Dancing with better dancers makes you dance better because you read cues from the body language of the dancers around you. If you aren't connecting well with someone, don't assume it's only due to your inexperience; there are factors such as height and size differences, bearing and demeanor, comfort levels (including your own), infirmity and, yes, differences in skill and coordination. You may even be the more capable dancer.

Even the best dancers make mistakes. Seamless recovery from them is a skill that can take deep familiarity with the figures and their timing. We learn from childhood that we shouldn't cut corners to finish tasks. When it comes to contra dancing it's best to untrain yourself from this mindset. Things usually go better if you flub the current figure if you have to, to be on time for the next. For example, it's almost impossible to chase after a missed star or circle and arrive on time because the path outside of it is longer. Still, the impulse is to chase instead of taking the shortest path to the next figure.

As you get better you'll find room to improvise, but don't forget flow and connection. Sometimes a dancer who is lost in the moment will take extra time twirling or encroach on others' space while doing fancy flourishes. This can disrupt the flow and coordination among dancers. Flourishing can also reduce connection. For example, twirling to swap is a fun substitute for a so-called courtesy turn, but an actual courtesy turn is much more intimate.

Connection is more than joining hands and moving together as a unit; it's a subjective experience resulting from dancing well together, comfort with your partner and neighbors, and music well matched to great choreography. It's both a one-on-one and a one-with-group experience. Becoming more comfortable with eye contact and close physical proximity while dancing is a natural process that works differently for everyone. Connection can only be felt within your comfort zone. Seeing your boundaries respected and returning that respect enables connection. You're likely to notice this happening frequently. This may soften your boundaries while keeping them intact. You might see some dancers getting so enthralled in connection that it becomes indistinguishable from unbridled flirting. A beginner could easily misconstrue this. Intense dance chemistry is intriguing, but its connotations rarely extend beyond the dance floor.

Contra dances are one of the safest places anywhere, but since they're social gatherings of humans, sometimes you'll encounter someone who rubs you the wrong way. Don't let inexperience and our relaxed norms lead you to ignore your instincts. Being gently propelled as part of giving weight is good dancing, but getting forced into a move or treated roughly is not. We dance in close quarters. Accidental brushing up against inappropriate places on the body does happen, but nonconsensual acts and rude comments or behavior cross a line. Dance organizers want to know about it and will intervene if necessary. You might not feel invested enough to take the step of reporting, but we would rather you do instead of quietly walking away and never coming back. Care is a greater trait of a good dancer than is a display of skill. Skill is easily noticed from the sidelines. Care is more noticeable while dancing. Take note of those who put you at ease, respect your boundaries, adapt to mesh with you, and get your consent before initiating anything forceful. These are partners who set an example worth emulating.

* * *